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ABSTRACT

This fastback document explores ways to develop alternative high-school programs to help at-risk students. It focuses on the "school within a school" model where the emphasis is on a caring school climate and smaller class sizes. The booklet offers a step-by-step guide for developing an alternative school, which begins with determining the need for, and purpose of, the program. Next, school officials must obtain funding for the program, provide planning time, examine how the program will be accepted, hire staff, name the program, establish class offerings, determine policies, admit students, decide on various instructional strategies, choose facilities and equipment, and evaluate the program. The text emphasizes the importance of taking enough time to implement each stage of the process correctly and making sure that the right persons are chosen for each task. The optimal size of a "school within a school" depends on the reason for the program, the available resources, the size of the school, and other factors. Most programs have between 30 and 80 students; if the program is much larger, it becomes difficult to meet the academic and social needs of individual students. The alternative school should also have autonomy and should encourage flexibility in teaching assignments. (Contains 11 references.) (RJM)

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Creating a School-Within-A-School

Aldo Sicoli

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Aldo Sicoli

Aldo Sicoli started and evaluated school-within-a-school programs while principal at Lincoln East High School in Lincoln, Nebraska, and as an assistant principal at Henry Sibley High School in West St. Paul, Minnesota. Prior to his work as an administrator, Sicoli was a social studies and business education teacher for eight years at Minnehaha Academy High School in Minneapolis and at Waseca High School in Waseca, Minnesota.

Sicoli received his B.A. in psychology and child psychology from the University of Minnesota. He received his M.B.A. from Texas Tech University and his M.A.T. from the College of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. His Ed.D. in educational policy and administration is from the University of Minnesota. His dissertation focused on an evaluation of a school-within-a-school program.

Series Editor, Donovan R. Walling

Creating a School-Within-a-School

by
Aldo Sicoli

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Why a School-Within-a-School

Many students need alternative school programs. These settings enable educators to match instructional strategies to the learning styles of students. One form of alternative school is the school-within-a-school, which was developed at the secondary level to break down the size and numbers of large, comprehensive high schools into more manageable and humane units (Young 1990).

Many schools-within-a-school originally were formed to respond to increasing numbers of underachieving, at-risk, and disruptive students (Raywid 1985). There still are large numbers of such students. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) stated that 25% of adolescents are extremely vulnerable to multiple high-risk behaviors and to dropping out of school. Another 25% may be at moderate risk. Many alternative programs are aimed at helping such students. Establishing a school-within-a-school is simply an organizationally and financially effective way to create such alternative programs.

Effective alternative programs differ from traditional programs in a number of ways, and they also differ from each other. But all effective alternative programs have some common characteristics. For example, school climate is seen as extremely important in alternative programs because many struggling students consider traditional school environments to be uncaring and even hostile. Another characteristic of most alternative programs is that students and staff choose to enter the program, rather than being assigned to it. Alternative programs are designed to respond to needs, desires, or interests not met in local schools. They address a broader range of student development than just the cognitive or academic. Also, the impetus to launch the alternative program often comes from teachers, students, or parents.

Because alternative programs are aimed at meeting unmet needs, they often restructure particular aspects of the traditional school: organization, environment, and curriculum and instruction (Raywid 1993).

Organization: An important organizational characteristic of the school-within-a-school is that both the program and individual classes are small. The advantages of small classes and programs are that students cannot remain anonymous and the staff can provide each student with individual attention. In large, comprehensive high schools, many struggling students are anonymous and thus do not receive needed assistance until their problems are severe. This is particularly true of students who do not have behavioral problems. For busy educators, such students are "out of sight, out of mind."

The optimal size for a school-within-a-school depends on the reason for the program, other resources available to students, the size of the high school in which the program will be located, and other, individual factors. Most programs have between 30 and 80 students. If the program is much larger, it is difficult to meet the academic and social needs of individual students. However, alternative programs often grow quickly. If the program grows too large, the camaraderie among students is lost. It is equally important to keep class sizes small. Students need to be heard and to feel that their opinions are important. Furthermore, small classes allow for the flexibility that makes individualization possible.

Another important organizational characteristic is that the school-within-a-school should have control of its own program. The small size of these programs not only allows such control but also encourages flexibility in teacher assignments. For example, teachers may teach interdisciplinary courses or act as student advisors, with such assignments determined by the teachers and program coordinators.

Environment: The school environment is important for student success. Conant (1992) believes that the school climate offered by alternative programs can improve student self-esteem, reduce the dropout rate, and increase productivity. Participation, caring, trust, respect, and recognition are important in creating a sense of community that will better serve at-risk students in these programs (Rossi and Stringfield 1995).

Because alternative programs have fewer rules and regulations and students have the power to leave the

program if they are dissatisfied, students have a stronger sense of power than do students in traditional programs (Raywid 1984). This also increases the amount of respect demonstrated in the program.

Students perceive the biggest difference in alternative programs to be their "caring" teachers (Raywid 1984; Sicoli 1997). This is significant because the students most likely to drop out of high school are those who do not believe that adults in their school care about their welfare (Fine 1987).

A caring staff, positive incentives, and a willingness on the part of staff to address the student as a whole person are three school environmental factors that lead to increased student performance and improved student perceptions of school. These factors are prevalent in many alternative programs. Such programs often are a better fit than the traditional education system for the student who has had relatively little success and who finds it hard to have confidence and competence in a school setting.

Curriculum and Instruction: In a study of 300 alternative students who attended eight high schools, Foley and McConnaughy (1982) found that the characteristics that made the alternative high schools successful were a student-centered curriculum, varied roles for teachers, and noncompetitive classrooms. This is not surprising, because many struggling students feel that they have had little control over their school experiences. Thus having curricular options is appealing to them. In addition, noncompetitive classrooms tend to encourage

more effort from struggling students because those classrooms are not seen as threatening experiences. Other instructional characteristics of effective alternative schools are individualized approaches to instruction geared toward mastery of clearly identified objectives, prompt feedback, opportunities outside of school, and joint decision making and cooperation by teachers (Fischer and Gale 1994).

Effective alternative programs share some common organizational, environmental, and programmatic characteristics. Although there is no one formula for an effective school-within-a-school, some important ingredients are: a shared vision; a caring staff that addresses many issues in students' lives; choices within the program, as well as a choice on the part of students and teachers to be in the program; experiential learning that has relevance for students; a student-centered curriculum; an emphasis on positive incentives for students, rather than an emphasis on punishment or coercion; and small program size.

When designing a school-within-a-school program, it is important to keep these considerations in mind. The next section examines the steps in creating a successful school-within a-school.

Steps in Creating a School-Within-a-School

The steps described here can be used as a guide to the planning process. However, steps may be added or deleted depending on the needs of the school adopting such a program. The steps are described roughly in order, but one should keep in mind that several steps must be addressed at any given time.

Determine the Need for and Purpose of the Program

There are many reasons why one may institute a school-within-a-school. Such programs may focus on serving students who have problems in their personal lives, those who are academically unsuccessful, those who have behavior problems, those who have dropped out, or those with a specific interest. However, most alternative programs serve students who are behind in earning credits that would allow them to graduate with their class. Serving students who are behind in credits toward graduation makes sense because the personal

and social costs of dropping out are high. Because these students are still in school, they are easier to reach than are students who already have dropped out. In addition, the number of credits a student has earned is an easy method for determining a student's need for the program. However, not all students who are behind in credits should be recommended for an alternative program, nor should all students who are on pace to graduate with their class not be allowed into the school-within-a-school. Each student's case should be considered individually.

Once it has been determined that an alternative program would be beneficial, an organization must concentrate on the philosophy of the program. The first issue is who should be involved in developing this philosophy. It is helpful if a cross-section of personnel who work with struggling students is represented in the efforts to develop a philosophy. The makeup of the team will vary, but the initial team is likely to consist of teachers, counselors, and administrators. Others, such as a case manager for at-risk students, a school psychologist, or a social worker, may be involved from the start or may be included later. However, the initial team should include at least one representative from special education. It is important to try to keep the initial group small so that plans can move forward; others can be added later as various needs arise.

The makeup of the start-up team should be guided by an initial philosophy, which the team then will refine. This philosophy is needed to guide efforts and to inform staff so that the appropriate persons may express interest in the program. The philosophy will be refined

later, once the staff members for the program have been assigned or hired.

The philosophy of the program will affect policy and organization, as well as which students are admitted. When discussing philosophy, the team should consider to what extent school requirements and rules will be modified to allow students to be successful. When doing so, it is important to remember that many alternative programs have failed because educators and community members set the expectations too low. Students are sent the wrong message when they are told they do not need to meet the same requirements as other students. It is usually better to maintain district graduation requirements while creating new ways to meet those requirements or new ways to deliver instruction.

Some privileges may be granted to students in alternative programs. For instance, some of the furniture in the classrooms may be more comfortable than traditional classroom furniture. Or occasional class trips to the school snack bar may be used as a reward. These types of privileges often make students feel as if their human needs are being met, and they allow time for social discussion that helps students feel they are valued. However, there is danger in granting such privileges because other school staff and students may view the program as less rigorous and may refer to it as "a joke." Therefore it is important from the start to discuss what types of privileges or exceptions will be made and what the ramifications may be.

An important philosophical discussion is to determine which students to serve. For example, will the pro-

gram include students of all ages in the high school or only younger or older students? I have seen successful programs that serve high school students of all ages, ones that serve only older students, and ones that serve only younger high school students. Those that serve only juniors and seniors (as determined by age, not by credits earned) recognize that the older students are most in need of the program because they are behind in credits and their class will be graduating soon. Another reason for serving older students is the belief that younger students should first try the traditional school program and enter the alternative program only if they are unsuccessful in the traditional program. Alternative programs that do not serve juniors or seniors operate under the assumption that the freshmen and sophomore students are more "savable" because there is more time until their class graduates.

The ages of students served may change as a program develops over time. For example, the Sibley Alternative Innovative Learning (SAIL) program at Henry Sibley High School in West St. Paul, Minnesota, began by serving only ninth- and tenth-grade students. Students were required to be in the traditional school program at least one semester before entering the SAIL program. One of the goals of the program was to help students adjust so they could successfully return to the traditional school program. It quickly became clear that forcing students out of the program when they became juniors was doing them a disservice. Older students expressed a desire to stay in the program, sometimes for just one or two class periods. Many of the students would not have been as

successful if their ties to the program were cut. Therefore the program was changed to accommodate older students.

Another consideration is what to do with students who receive special education services. Some programs exclude special education students because these programs are designed to serve students who are not yet receiving extra help in school. However, excluding special education students from alternative programs is both illegal and morally wrong. Special education students have as much right as any other student to be considered for entrance into a school-within-a-school. However, it is inappropriate for school-within-a-school services to be written into a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). This is because schools-within-a-school are too small to provide direct special education services. Special education students can receive direct services more effectively outside the program. This is not difficult in alternative programs that meet for only part of the school day. Of course, special education students would still receive appropriate accommodations in their alternative program classes.

Another important philosophical consideration is to determine how long the school-within-a-school will be in operation during the school day. There are effective alternative programs that serve students for the entire school day. Other successful programs operate for a portion of the school day — normally four or five class periods in a school that has seven or eight periods. A program that serves students for the entire day is more expensive because of the smaller class sizes in the al-

ternative program, but some students may need those services for the entire school day. Programs that operate for only part of the day typically do so in the morning. This makes it more likely for students to attend because students often prefer the alternative portion of their day and because the personnel in the program are better able to contact students and parents if students are not present at the start of the day. In addition, most work-experience programs are more active in the afternoon because that is when more jobs are available for students. Morning alternative programs give students the option of working for credit in the afternoon.

Having students return to the traditional program for two hours a day can be beneficial for both the students and the school. Students sometimes become more motivated in those classes than they were previously because they know that they need to act appropriately and be successful if they want to maintain their spot in the school-within-a-school. It also allows students an opportunity to choose elective classes that cannot be offered within the smaller alternative program. Another benefit is that teachers who do not teach in the alternative program realize the positive effects of the program when they see students from the program behaving more appropriately and having more success in their traditional classes.

Obtain Funding for the Program

Additional funds are necessary to start a school-within-a-school. A number of avenues can be pursued in at-

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tempting to fund the program. Some districts have been quite generous in allocating resources to alternative programs because they have made it a priority to assist at-risk students. There also are many agencies that give grants for a variety of educational endeavors. Applying for grants to several agencies may prove fruitful. For example, while the Lincoln Public Schools provided a substantial amount of money to start the SCORE (School and Community Opportunities for Relevant Education) program at Lincoln Northeast High School, the first school-within-a-school in that district, the district could not afford to fund new alternative programs at the same level because state funding decreased. The other high schools in the district sought help from other sources. Lincoln East High School received a school-to-career grant for its program because the program included a career component. In addition, some resources used for at-risk students were reallocated to the program at Lincoln East High School.

While it does cost money to properly implement a school-within-a-school program for struggling students, the costs are not so high that they should prevent schools from instituting alternative programs when there is a real need for such programs.

Provide Planning Time

An effective alternative program is well planned and is not rushed to implementation. When a program is implemented hurriedly, there is no time to anticipate problems. There also is no time to research and to learn

from what others have done in their programs. Most important, there is not enough time for the teachers in the program to discuss philosophy, policies, and curriculum. These drawbacks can be overcome only after a great expense in energy and morale.

There are several ways to provide sufficient planning time. First, the program coordinator and the teachers must be hired well before the program is started. It is essential that these educators be given paid planning time in order to develop curriculum and expectations and to deal with other issues related to their particular program. Teachers can be paid to meet in the summer and during evenings and weekends.

It also is helpful for the teachers to have an additional planning period for at least one semester prior to the opening of the school-within-a-school. This additional period should be scheduled at the same time for all the teachers in the program. This will give them time to work together without having to juggle schedules. This goes a long way toward increasing the likelihood of an effectively planned alternative program.

It is equally important for the teachers to have a common planning period once the school-within-a-school has opened. This will foster more team teaching and greater implementation of interdisciplinary curriculum. It also gives teachers a chance to share information about students in order to better meet the needs of those students. In addition, it becomes easier to plan field trips and to discuss changes in expectations and policies if everyone has the same planning period. If the alternative program is in session during the first four class

hours of the school day, then the fifth hour could be a common planning period for teachers in the program. This likely would give them the planning period plus a lunch period in which to communicate with each other.

Scheduling common planning periods can be difficult and puts greater constraints on the master schedule. However, having adequate planning time in common with others in the program is one of the most important things that can be done to develop an effective school-within-a-school.

Address How the Program Will Be Accepted

It is important to consider, at an early date, issues relating to how the larger school community will accept the program. If the school is large, it is likely that there will be teachers opposed to the idea of a school-within-a-school. To some teachers, the school-within-a-school may represent a watering down of the curriculum. Others may resent committing resources to students who are relatively unsuccessful. Although it would be difficult to convince everyone of the merits of alternative programs, steps should be taken to dispel the negative myths that may be associated with a given program. Fostering goodwill with the rest of the school helps build student and staff pride in the program. There are some steps that can be taken in this direction.

Hiring staff from outside the building may cause resentment among existing staff. But hiring experienced teachers from within the school lends credibility to a new program. A respected colleague who opts to teach

in the new alternative program will cause others to think twice before criticizing the school-within-a-school.

Another important method for building credibility is to have teachers teach classes in both the school-within-a-school and the traditional program. Continuing to teach classes in the traditional program encourages teachers to maintain high expectations for students in the alternative program. It also promotes sharing ideas with those who teach in the traditional school program. This allows teachers in both the traditional and alternative programs to share effective ideas. However, some teachers work only in the alternative programs and many of these programs are very effective. These teachers focus their energies on the alternative program and get to know the alternative students better. But something can be lost when a teacher is not regularly exposed to what happens in the larger school environment. Teachers who teach in both programs are more likely to feel like team members in the larger school. And their colleagues are less likely to view the alternative program as a totally separate entity.

Another way to lend credibility to the program is to demonstrate that students are expected to meet the same graduation requirements that other students must meet. An effective way of doing this is to show how district course objectives are being met in the alternative classes. Some programs create an information sheet for each alternative course that shows how the objectives of a given course are met in the alternative course. It is a lot of work to develop such documentation, but it can go a long way toward countering criticism of the program.

It also is helpful to have periodic updates of the program at faculty meetings. These updates should start during the planning phases of the program to ensure that all teachers have correct information regarding the program. Faculty members are then better equipped to recommend appropriate students for the program. Once data is gathered regarding the effectiveness of the program, it is essential that this data be shared with the whole faculty. Taking these steps will increase understanding and support for the new program.

Hire Staff

Not only is it critical to hire the right people, it also is important to hire them early. They must be able to work together to design an excellent program. It also is important for teachers to want to be in the program; teachers should not be merely assigned to the program.

The first person to hire is the person who will direct the program. It is best if the program director is hired at least one year prior to the opening of the school-within-a-school because this person will be involved with hiring teachers and facilitating the planning process for the program, as well as with administering the program once it has been implemented. The director will oversee curriculum and teaching in the program. She or he also will develop brochures and application forms, plan field trips, apply for grants, arrange student work opportunities or work with the school's work-experience coordinator, work with students on their progress toward graduation, work with student scheduling, and work with student discipline and attendance.

A full-time administrator should not be hired for this position. Instead, the program director should be a teacher or counselor or someone else who has direct contact with students. He or she must have a proven record of successful work with struggling students. A creative approach to curriculum and the delivery of instruction also is highly desirable. It is important for the chosen candidate to have excellent communication skills and to be able to work well with students, parents, teachers, and administrators.

Also, it is important to make a decision regarding the title of the person who will direct the program — coordinator, director, or facilitator — before requesting applications. In some districts the title of a position has implications for pay, and this should be considered when choosing a title.

It is unusual, but in some cases it is advantageous, to hire more than one person to share the duties of program coordinator. For example, the school-within-a-school program at Lincoln East High School has two program coordinators. They bring different strengths to the program, and each has other duties in the school. One of the coordinators is a case manager for at-risk students; this person works directly with many of the students who are struggling in the school. The other program coordinator is the school's experiential learning teacher. This is an asset to the program's strong school-to-career component. Of course, such an unusual arrangement requires the two program coordinators to work well with each other.

The posting of the teaching positions should occur very soon after the program director is hired. Teachers

also should be interviewed and hired at least a year before the program starts. This allows the school-within-a-school team to meet several times during the semester immediately following their selection. During these meetings they can develop a philosophy and some policies. Brochures can be created and curriculum can be discussed. During the second semester the alternative program staff can use their common planning period to focus on the development of curriculum, on contacting students, and on making final decisions regarding other issues pertaining to the program. During the summer before the implementation of the program, the team should be paid to meet periodically to work on finalizing curriculum, contacting students, and making final arrangements for the opening of the school-within-a-school.

The school-within-a-school will not be successful unless the right teachers are hired. Teachers working in the program must love working with struggling students and must have the skills to relate to those students. They must take great satisfaction in seeing such students achieve success in their academic and personal lives. It is helpful if the teachers are flexible and creative and have an interest in interdisciplinary team-teaching. They should be willing to discuss the nonacademic, as well as academic, needs of students.

It is best practice to hire good teachers who have experience. Promising first-year teachers can become frustrated when they have to deal with the added challenges that alternative students can present. Struggling students need the expertise of experienced teachers even

more than do students in gifted or advanced placement courses.

Name the Program

Once the staff has been hired, name the program. The staff should be involved in choosing the name. Most schools-within-a-school choose names that are positive and can be represented by an acronym. This works well when creating brochures, application forms, and logos. Having a positive-sounding acronym also makes an easy, shorthand way to refer to the program.

Determine the Class Offerings

One of the difficult aspects of starting a new program is that a decision needs to be made about which classes to offer before the number of students in the program is known. This is necessary in order to allot the appropriate number of teachers to the alternative program. It is best to assume that the program will start small and will grow during the first year.

The number of students that will start in the program depends on the need for the program, the marketing of the program, efforts at recruiting students for the program, and the general feeling of the larger school toward an alternative program. Most schools-within-a-school begin with between 15 and 45 students. The numbers are likely to grow during the first year, but it is wise to keep the numbers in this range or close to it. If the program grows too rapidly the first year, it may not be as effective in helping struggling students become success-

ful. If first year enrollment is between 15 and 45 students, then one can offer three sections of classes per period with a class size no greater than 15 students.

Which classes should the program offer? If the students in the program have failed particular classes in the regular program, they should be able to retake those classes in the alternative school-within-a-school. Thus it is important to offer required classes in the alternative program. If the school-within-a-school is a partial-day program, it becomes even more important to focus on required classes; students may take elective classes during the other hours of the school day. Electives can be added to the alternative program as it grows.

The other decision to be made concerning classes is whether to offer several levels of a subject such as English or to combine those levels into one class. The latter option requires greater flexibility on the part of the teacher. Which option is chosen will depend on student needs and teacher preferences.

Determine Policies

There are a number of policy decisions that need to be discussed early in the planning process because the policies will reflect the philosophy of the program. Also, there may be disagreements regarding proposed policies, and these will need to be resolved.

It is effective to use the behavioral policies of the traditional school. These policies are already familiar to students and staff; and the consistency will be useful, especially because students and staff will be working in both the alternative and the traditional program.

However, there may be differences between the school-within-a-school and the larger school in some policies. For example, some schools have attendance policies that prohibit students from receiving credit if they have a certain number of absences. While some alternative programs also have this policy, others do not, because they feel it is detrimental to students and does not significantly change attendance patterns. When adopting an attendance policy, it is important to remember that the students in the alternative program have had attendance problems and that this behavior does not change overnight. One study found that attendance patterns of students in a school-within-a-school improved the longer students were in the alternative program (Sicoli 1997). Adopting strict attendance policies may too quickly push students out of the program.

In order to stress the importance of good attendance, some alternative programs have students and parents sign an application form that includes a statement saying they will be committed to good attendance. When a student is absent, someone from the program calls a parent or guardian at the start of the school day. Parents should be informed in writing that this is a practice of the program. Often the program coordinator makes these calls. This facilitates communication between the coordinator and parents and also gives the program coordinator a chance to reinforce the belief that it is important for the student to be in school and that the school is trying to develop attendance patterns that will help students in the world of work. Another strategy is to

have a student who is a member of the absent student's "homeroom team" make the call. This peer pressure can be a powerful influence in getting students to school; however, it also can put students in awkward positions that may lead to conflicts. Of course, when the program becomes so popular that there is greater demand for entrance into the program than the number of available spots, the program coordinator can argue that it does not make sense to hold a spot in the program for a chronically absent student when there are other students who want to benefit from what the program has to offer.

Another important policy decision concerns grading. Using the same grading system as the rest of the school provides consistency when looking at credits earned and grade point average. However, there are some changes that may be useful. It may be helpful to parents and students if more written feedback is given on report cards. Also, written evaluations should be frequent. Perhaps midterm reports can be sent every three or four weeks from the alternative program staff. Frequent, specific feedback is important to students and is probably even more important to students who have had relatively little success in school. This is a reason why some alternative programs give grades more frequently than every nine or ten weeks. By getting credit for their work in a four- or five-week period, students can see the progress they are making toward graduation. However, shorter grading periods may be inconsistent with the rest of the school and may present problems when students are also taking classes in the traditional program.

Some alternative programs give partial credit for work done in partially completed courses. By piecing

together credit from several partially completed courses, these programs do not penalize students harshly if the students have a period of non-attendance during a semester. However, such systems can be bookkeeping nightmares for teachers and program coordinators and can convey decreased expectations for students.

Another potentially controversial policy decision is when to admit students into the program. Will students be allowed to enter the program only at semester breaks? This would make it easier to keep records and would make it more feasible for teachers to deliver appropriate instruction to all students in the class. Many programs allow students to enter at the beginning of a quarter. Other programs allow students to enter any time in the semester because students do not experience difficulties only during convenient breaks in instruction. Under this type of system, the teachers handle credit just as they would for a student who has transferred from another school in the middle of a grading period. They get records of the student's progress in their previous class and apply it to their grade in the new class.

There are advantages and disadvantages to putting restrictions on when students can enter a school-within-a-school program. This issue should not be taken lightly and should include suggestions from counselors and registrars, as well as from the alternative program staff.

Admit Students

Prior to accepting applications to the program, parents and students should be informed of the upcoming

school-within-a-school through newsletters, discussions with school personnel, and other means. It is important that students not be placed in the school-within-a-school against their will. Students also must be able to leave the program any time they wish. If these two components are not in place, students may perceive it as another forced school program.

Students must be expected to apply to the program, and parents must be involved in the process. A written application form signed by the student and parent may be a minimum requirement. Interviews may help to get students and parents to buy into the program.

Written application forms should request current addresses and home and work phone numbers for parents or guardians. The application should include contracts for students and parents. The student contract should contain items that ask for a commitment by the student. This may include an agreement that the student will follow all regulations regarding student conduct and commit to being physically and verbally nonviolent. The contract may require that the student agree to behave positively and respectfully toward others and self and to make a strong effort to be successful in school. Both the student and a parent or guardian should be required to sign the student contract.

The parent contract may ask the parent to agree to encourage daily attendance and to call the school office when the student will be absent. Parents should provide a phone number where they can be reached during the day. The parent contract also should state that parents are expected to return calls from program staff as soon

as possible and to attend two parent conferences annually. The parents also may be asked to provide a quiet place to study in the home and to communicate with the student to encourage academic success.

A team of staff members should decide which students are accepted into the program. Probably the best group for this job is the school's student assistance team, because this team meets regularly to discuss the needs of struggling students throughout the school. An advantage to using the student assistance team, rather than alternative program personnel, is that it gives a broader view of students applying to the program.

Student assistance teams usually include teachers, counselors, and administrators. Sometimes they also include school resource police officers, school nurses, school psychologists, and school drug and alcohol counselors. The alternative program coordinator should be a member of this team. It is likely that a group with such diverse roles will know more about a given student than would the staff of the alternative program. School personnel may suggest that a student apply to the school-within-a-school, but the student assistance team should discuss admitting only students who have submitted completed application forms.

If the initial interest in the program is not great, it may be necessary to recruit students for the program. This is a job the program coordinator can do, though the coordinator should solicit help from staff members who know specific students well. If recruiting students is necessary, it is important that those students complete application forms before being considered for the program.

Consider Various Instructional Strategies

Because the students in the school-within-a-school will have struggled in the traditional program, it is important that some things be done differently. An effective approach involves implementing a higher degree of experiential learning, team teaching, and interdisciplinary units. It is often easier to conduct interdisciplinary units in a school-within-a-school because the teachers have common planning periods and often have the same students. It also is easier for teachers to engage in team teaching because they are in the same area of the school. Because there are fewer staff in a school-within-a-school, it is easier to block courses. It is even easier if students in the program are required to be in it for all periods in which the alternative program is in session. Such blocking makes team teaching easier, but counselors and the administrator who works with scheduling need to be informed.

Frequent use of learning experiences outside the school building can increase relevance for students. Bringing in resources from outside the building can increase student interest. Some programs bring in recovering drug addicts and panels of teenagers who are parents. Alternative students usually are extremely interested in such topics because they have seen or experienced similar problems in their own lives. It is a great way for students to sort through some of their personal problems and also is a good way to develop trust in one's peers and teachers.

Choose Facilities and Equipment

It is important to have the alternative classrooms located close to one another. Choosing four classrooms next to each other is an effective arrangement. It is even better if some of the classrooms can be connected through the use of a moveable wall or if there is a large group area that the program can use. This is important for team teaching efforts and for programs that choose to meet regularly with all the students in the program. Some programs do this to facilitate ease of attendance and to discuss program policies or situations that might arise. Other programs use this time to discuss issues that might be of concern to students and to provide information on upcoming field trips, panel discussions, or similar events. Gathering all the students and teachers in the program also can be used to celebrate student success or as a reward for quality performance or attendance.

The rooms used for the school-within-a-school should not be the worst rooms in the school. They should be rooms that are in good condition so that students can take pride in the program, rather than feel that they are not valued. The location of the classrooms also is important. For example, proximity to an available science lab makes it easier to teach science in the alternative program. If the classrooms are close to the office, it is easier for administrators to support and recognize the efforts of those in the program. It also facilitates quick response if a potentially explosive situation should arise.

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It is important to secure good equipment for the program. Computers located in the school-within-a-school will help students feel they are part of an important program. Computers also give the flexibility of individualized instruction for those who need it. There are software programs in all subjects that can be used effectively for filling in parts of the curriculum that students have missed. Some software programs also allow students to proceed at their own pace.

It is unlikely that a building will have an ideal physical arrangement for a school-within-a-school. Therefore it is important to determine which factors are most important for a particular school. A commitment to provide quality classrooms and equipment while keeping the alternative classrooms in the same area is important in developing a successful program.

Evaluating the Program

Every program must be evaluated. The evaluation provides information on how the school-within-a-school affects student performance and which aspects of the program students, parents, and teachers think are important. It also may include recommendations for improving the program. This is useful information for students, parents, teachers, administrators, school board members, and the general public.

It is important to keep in mind that positive change does not always happen quickly with students who have struggled for years. However, it is not unusual for an evaluation of an alternative program to provide positive data on the first year of operation. This then becomes a source of pride in the program.

The success of the program can be determined through various measures. It is useful to use some objective data, such as changes in grade point average, credits earned, the number of absences, the number of discipline referrals, and the number of days of out-of-school suspension received by students in the alternative program. This type of data is readily available in school records and can be obtained for each student both

prior to entrance into the program and after becoming an alternative student. Gathering the data, analyzing it, and organizing it into a readily accessible format is time-consuming, but it is definitely worthwhile. The program coordinator and the administrator who works with the program can work together to accomplish this task.

One should wait at least one year before presenting any report that compares student data from before entrance into the program with data after students have been involved with the school-within-a-school. Alternative programs are not magical cure-alls. This will become apparent when one looks at the data on these objective measures.

The above measures are even more useful if the variables are correlated with students' length of stay in the program, because change in behavior usually takes time. The usefulness of the data can be increased even further if one analyzes the data for various subgroups within the alternative program, such as males, females, those in various grade levels, and those involved in work experience programs. This type of data also provides group measurements and indicates which students are receiving the greatest benefit from being in the program.

Subjective data also can be used. Perceptions of those involved with the program are important and can tell a great deal about the program. Therefore surveys and interviews of students, parents, teachers, and the program coordinator are helpful. Written surveys should be kept short and easy to read so people will complete them. It is important to ask what is liked and disliked about the

program and to ask for the respondents' perceptions of the frequency and quality of feedback concerning student performance and the monitoring of attendance and academics. It is also worthwhile to ask for suggestions on how to improve the program. Surveys and interviews also may ask about specific aspects of the program, such as class size and the effect of caring teachers. They may ask about the importance of discussing nonacademic issues in the classroom, the amount of hands-on learning and its importance, and the amount of student choice. It may be surprising how many parents and students are willing to provide this information if the questions are kept short.

A formal evaluation may be required by the district's board of education, and such data can be helpful in securing and maintaining funding from the district and from funding agencies. Choices must be made regarding which types of data are most useful to gather, given the amount of time and energy available to devote to this task.

Conclusion

A school-within-a-school designed to help struggling students is not a new concept, but it can meet the needs of many students who have had little success in the traditional school environment.

Creating an effective school-within-a-school program takes a great deal of planning and effort from many persons. It is a big task that should not be done hastily. Programs rushed to implementation are more likely to be unsuccessful. Issues of organization, environment, and curriculum and instruction must be addressed when planning for a school-within-a-school.

There are many important steps involved in creating a school-within-a-school. The key to successfully completing these steps is to have the right persons involved and to provide enough time to accomplish the tasks.

It is important to evaluate the school-within-a-school. Determining how the evaluative data will be used will help in deciding what type of data to collect. Using some objective measures directly related to the goals of the program, such as student grade point average and number of credits earned, is useful in determining the success of the program and in maintaining funding for the school-

within-a-school. It is important to compare this data with data on the same students before they entered the program. Perceptions of students, parents, and teachers also are useful in determining which aspects of the program are effective and in deciding how to improve the program. Data regarding those perceptions should be gathered through written surveys and interviews.

The creation of a school-within-a-school, when done correctly, can be a powerful tool in fostering academic and social success among students who have struggled for a long time. The success of such students is the most convincing reason to create a school-within-a-school for struggling students.

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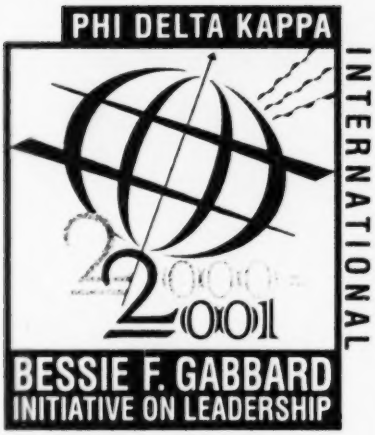

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